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ABSTRACT

In an effort to achieve a successful accreditation team visit from the North Central Association (NCA), Des Moines Area Community College, in Iowa, developed a team visit plan based on effective and thoughtful logistics planning and a strong, cooperative working relationship between the institution and the NCA consultant. In general, to prepare for the visit, the plan emphasizes the development of a time table and logistics schedule and the identification of responsibilities and approval for each phase of the operation. When forming the accreditation team, administrators should be aware of the ratio of faculty to administrators and make sure that major institutional focus and ethnic groups are represented. With respect to protocol, the two key people in the visit are the team chair and the college president, while the college community should do everything to make the team feel welcome without being patronizing. A team room should be established to provide a working area for the team, a site for documentation to support the self-study, and a place for private or small group meetings. Other functions which must be planned for include arranging for team members' transportation; planning special events, such as scheduled meetings with special groups; developing publications and logos necessary for the visit; and handling communications to college personnel, the board of trustees, state boards, and the media regarding the visit. (TGI)

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MAKING THE MOST OF THE ACCREDITATION TEAM VISIT

The logistics of an North Central Association (NCA) accreditation team visit often receive less attention than the self-study process yet may have a profound impact on the outcome of the team's deliberations. This paper will describe the steps which Des Moines Area Community College took to prepare for a comprehensive evaluation by a twelve-member team. The timetable begins approximately one year before the visit and continues until the institution receives formal notification of the Commission's final action.

One key to a successful visit is to develop a strong working relationship between the self study coordinator, the team chair and your NCA consultant. The visit should be viewed as an opportunity to present your institution to a team of knowledgeable peers who will provide you with valuable advice.

The NCA Handbook contains an excellent check list which is helpful in preparing for the visit. This session builds on this list by (1) providing useful tips on how to organize the visit, (2) presenting examples of letter and documents and (3) including the perspective of a team chair on organizing the visit.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

1. Develop a time table for the self study and meet all time objectives. Allow at least two months prior to the visit for review and input on the self study from your NCA consultant.

2. Develop a separate "logistics" schedule with all activities and responsibilities clearly outlined. Meet personally with all staff members who have responsibilities for events to be sure they fully understand expectations and deadlines.

3. Clearly identify who has ultimate responsibility and approval for each phase of the operation. Ideally, the president will delegate authority for logistics to the self study coordinator. The team chair will work with this one person to organize all aspects of the visit. It is also helpful for the President to publicly announce the need for all staff to cooperate fully with the Coordinator.

4. Designate one person to provide secretarial support on the logistics function. All information and activity should be funneled through this office. This person will logically provide similar support when the team comes to the campus.

TEAM COMPOSITION REVIEW

The NCA office will send the president a proposed team list which biographical information on each member. You may assume all team members are competent and well-qualified. It is important to review the proposed team members with the self study steering committee to assess the appropriateness of their backgrounds. You may conclude the team members lack depth in areas which are important to your institution. Your president will be asked by NCA to respond to the team composition and should request that a team member with specific characteristics be added. (It is never appropriate to suggest which team member should be deleted.)

Here are some typical concern areas:

1. The ratio of faculty members is low when compared to administrators.

2. A major focus in your institution is not reflected on the team (health occupations education, vocational education).

3. You are anticipating consulting assistance from the team in an area in which the team appears to lack background and experience.

4. Your institution has a ethnic or racial minority which is not represented on the team.

It is inappropriate for anyone from the institution to make contact with the team chair or any team members until the NCA consultant confirms the team is complete and contact can be made.

PROTOCOL

1. The two key people in a team visit are the team chair and the college president. Each may delegate certain tasks and functions to others, but each will always have the final say on key decisions.

2. All team communication prior to the team's arrival should be with the team chair, or with his/her approval.

3. All meetings should include a college representative to welcome and introduce the team and to provide any needed technical assistance.

4. College administrators (and their associates) should respect the need for the team to visit in private with individuals and groups. For example, the president's secretary should not attend an "open" meeting of administrative support staff since his/her presence might inhibit discussion. Often the team will prefer to meet with the members of the board of trustees, without the President in attendance. In all cases, the administrator should ask the team chair how they prefer to structure the meeting and who they wish to attend.

5. The college president should chair all meetings he/she attends (usually the opening meeting and the exit meeting). The president also has the right to determine who from the institution should attend these two meetings.

6. The team report (preliminary and final) are the property of the college president. He/she determines its distribution within the institution.

7. The president should assume the major role for making sure the team feels welcome at the institution.

8. All college staff should be present during the visit and should make the needs of the team their primary concern during this time.

9. A follow up report (in a thank you letter or other correspondence) should be sent to all guests who attended meetings with the team.

10. The team chair should be alerted to recognize the efforts of key individuals within the institution at appropriate times (often during the exit interview).

HOSPITALITY

The general rule is to do everything possible to make the team feel welcome and comfortable without being patronizing. The team chair should be consulted about your hospitality plans to be sure he/she is comfortable with the activities.

1. Personally meet and welcome all team members when they arrive in your community. Use the trip from the airport as a time to provide information about the college and community.

2. Select a hotel which is pleasant, but not luxurious. Ideally, the hotel should either have a good restaurant or be close to one. Be sure the hotel will provide meeting room facilities, which include a large table and comfortable chairs. (In some cases a suite for the team chair will meet this need.) Inform the team about the hotel (enclose a colorful brochure if possible), including the address and phone numbers.

3. Provide courtesies to team members in their hotel room when they arrive. These should be modest in cost. Some possibilities are a fruit basket, a "local products" package or candy and sweets.

4. Have coffee and appropriate refreshments in the team room and at each team function. Be sure it is refreshed and replaced throughout the day.

5. Prepare a list of team members with brief (one paragraph) biographies for distribution to members of groups who meet with the team.

6. Provide a support person (self-study secretary) who will be available to assist the team with their needs throughout the visit.

7. Provide the team with a college phone book, campus and building layout.

8. Contact each team member to determine their computer needs. Arrange for the computers in the team room.

9. Designated reserved parking spaces for NCA team.

10. If the college has an external sign board or internal electronic message boards, a note of welcome to the NCA team should be posted.

TEAM ROOM

A team room or rooms should be established to support these functions: a work room for the team; a site for information and documentation to support the self study and a place for private or small group meetings. The room should have a central location on the campus. The team room should be treated as a "private" room which allows the team's privacy to be respected at all times.

These steps should be taken to assemble materials for the room.

1. Develop a list of items which need to be assembled.

   a. Get input from the steering committee, self study committees and other key individuals in the organization.

   b. Carefully review the institutional self study and general institutional requirements to identify items. (The report may say, "This information will be included in the team room.")

   c. Ask the team chair for suggestions for additional items for the room.

2. Arrange all support documents in a logical sequence in several major groupings. Use high visible table cards which specify the name of the item. Prepare a printed index in outline form which makes it easy for the team to find items.

3. Reassemble and reorganize the materials in the room at the end of the day.

TRANSPORTATION

1. Develop a detailed travel itinerary for each team member which includes name, arrival and departure dates and times, flight. numbers, needs for local transportation.

2. Provide college cars for local transportation (if available).

3. Supply a driver for team members during the visit. If possible it should be a person who can discuss the college and respond to questions. (This is especially important if the team travels to multiple locations.)

4. Take the team members to the airport at the conclusion of the team visit.

SPECIAL EVENTS

The typical team visit includes several scheduled meeting with special groups, both internal and external to the institution. It is important to prepare to structure these meetings to ensure the team has access to the people who will provide them with required information. Here are some general guidelines.

1. Receive approval from the team chair concerning any group meetings as well as the each will be scheduled.

2. Thoughtfully select the individuals to be invited to provide a cross section of opinion and experience.

3. Notify the members of all groups, usually in writing, about the purpose, time and format for the meeting.

   a. Include a team biography sheet.

   b. Provide attractive and readable name badges.

   c. Have a college representative(s) at meetings to greet participants and introduce them to team members.

4. If the meeting includes a meal be sure seating assignments have been made to place team members in proximity with people who will have information which is of interest to them. Keep meal functions (except formal dinners) simple and short to allow maximum time for discussion.

5. Keep events on schedule--assist the team chair (or key member) by reminding them of the ending time.

PUBLICATIONS/LOGOS

All printed materials and displays which relate to the visit should have a unified theme and layout. This should usually include the institution's name or initials, "NCA team visit", the date. A logo which incorporates the institutions's name and NCA should be used. Here are some applications:

1. Cover of self study and appendix

2. All brochures related to the visit

3. Executive summary

4. Name badges (team members and all who may meet team members including staff, guests and students in meeting groups)

5. "Welcome" banners and posters

UNUSUAL ITEMS

1. The team members will often arrive on Saturday (for a visit which begins on Monday morning). An offer to provide them with information on interesting features of the community, and to accompany them, is appreciated. However, you should not make a team member to accept, since many will use the time to prepare for the visit.

2. A pre-visit by the team chair is seldom required except in unusual circumstances. The NCA consultant must make arrangements with the team chair and approve the pre-visit.

COMMUNICATIONS

1. A series of internal press releases should be published in the appropriate college newsletter to keep college personnel informed of the progress on the self study, from the beginning through the final action by the Commission.

2. The board of trustees should be briefed periodically about the process and their role in the self study.

3. State boards or other agencies which have responsibility for the institution should receive appropriate information.

4. Copies of the completed self study and appendix should be available to all staff members upon request and should be placed in all key offices and libraries.

5. Appropriate press releases should be distributed at the conclusion of the visit and when official final action is completed by the Commission.

SUMMARY

A successful NCA accreditation team visit is based on effective and thoughtful logistics planning coupled with precise execution of the plan. A strong and cooperative working relationship between the team chair and the institution is a key component of a satisfying visit.

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